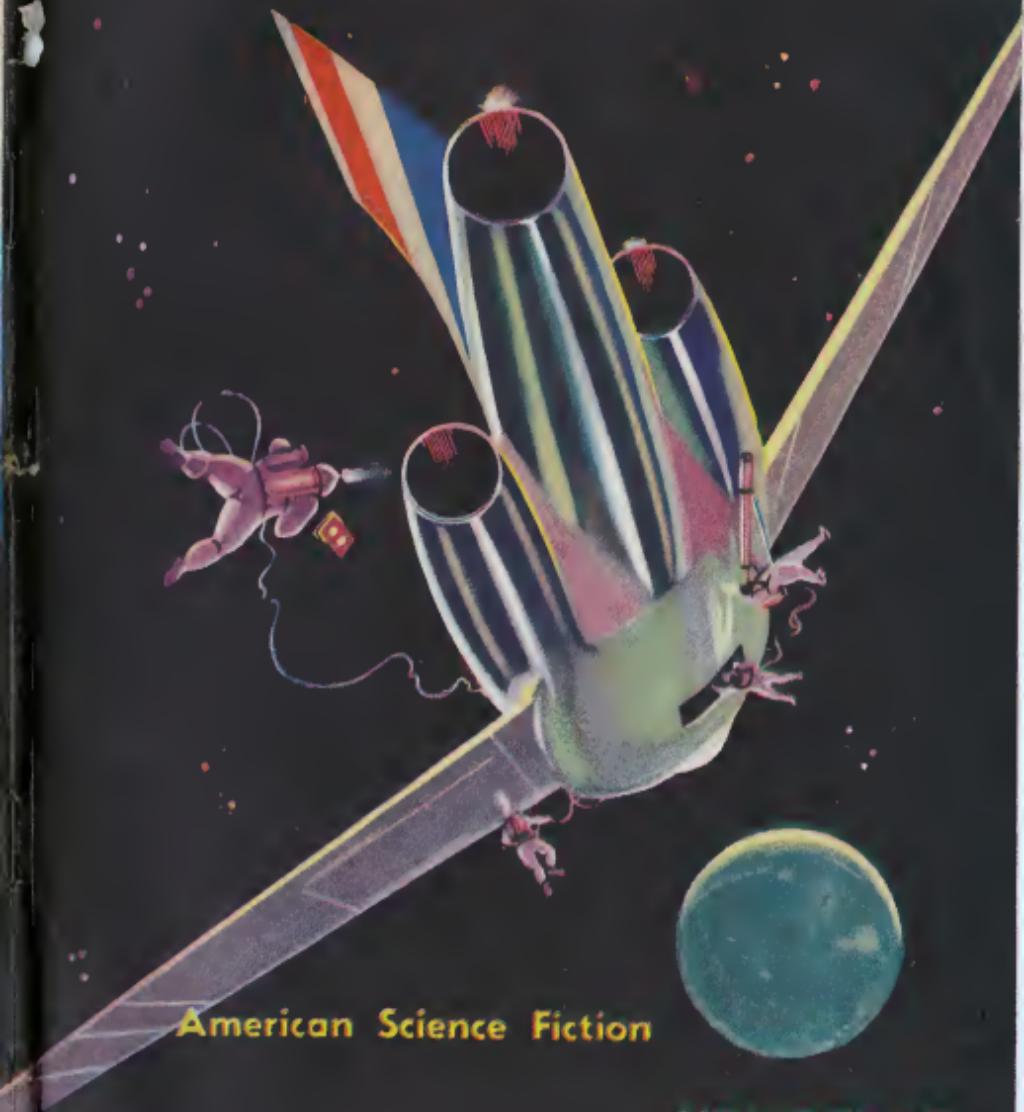


Moon-Blind

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American Science Fiction

NINEPENCE



MOON-BLIND

By ERIC VAN LIIN

Either Soames or all of Earth was crazy. He knew he'd landed on the Moon in 1948. They knew no ship had left Earth and that he had died in World War II. And all the proof was on their side.

AFTER four years, the clouds looked good. From up there, they had been blurs on the white and green ball that hung in the sky to mock him. Now, as they seemed to rush up towards him they spelled home—or death. There were worse things than death.

For the moment, the sight of the Earth swelling below him brought a lump in Bill Soames' throat. He'd hated it, cursed it, and screamed at it during the long Lunar days. He'd loathed the smug fools on it who had deserted him after calling him a hero and had left him to die or get back by himself. But now the call of his kind washed all that out. A thousand miles below were people, life, and home. It didn't matter what they'd done to him, or why they had done it; he'd lived through it somehow, and now he was almost there.

He shivered in the wash of emotions. His gaunt, almost skeletal body jerked under the flood of adrenalin, and his scarred, claw-like hands gripped the edge of the control board savagely. The starved hollows in his cheeks deepened, and the wisps of white hair on his head were beaded with drops of cold perspiration.

Behind him, the uneven roar of the rocket had been making the little ship quiver with subsonic vibrations. These halted suddenly, began again, and then were gone. The last of his bitterly acquired fuel was exhausted. Weightlessness caught his tortured

body, sending anguished cramps through him and threatening to end his hard-held hold on consciousness. He mastered himself after a moment of retching, and reached for the tiny crank that would spin the gyroscopes. He turned it madly, to the limit of his strength. Imperceptibly, the view of Earth in the plate that showed the ship's rear began to twist.

It took time to turn the ship that way, and he had little time left. The atmosphere was rushing up. He'd been luckier than he had expected; the rocket had killed most of his speed. But now he had to strike that two-hundred mile layer of air head foremost. The crank seemed to fight against him, but the ship was swinging. Here in space, Newton's third law worked perfectly. For every action, an equal and opposite reaction. A few thousand turns of the little wheel geared to the crank would turn the ship half a revolution in the other direction.

Four years before, when he had turned over to brake down to the Moon, it had been easy. He'd been strong, then, full of energy. He'd been the conquering hero. Months of conditioning and training had gone by, and he had walked up the ramp to the ship entrance with perfect health and complete confidence. He'd grinned at the generals and the reporters gathered to see the first manned flight to the Moon, and he'd known he would come back.

Well, he was coming back—

through no help from them. The ship had been a gem, and the landing on the Moon had been almost routine. He'd sent back his radar message, located the single unmanned supply ship they'd sent ahead, and settled down to getting ready for the other ones still to arrive.

They never came, and there was no message from Earth!

When he landed, July 5, 1948, he had had enough food to last him nearly four months, counting the supplies in the unmanned ship. He hadn't worried too much, at first. Air was renewed by the pumpkin vines and tomatoes that filled one chamber of the ship, and the water he used was recovered automatically. Something had held up his supply ships, but they'd be along shortly with the water that served as fuel for the big atomic-powered rocket; as for the message, probably something was wrong with his receiver.

In August, he began worrying, after he'd caught bits of some conversation on his microwave set and found it worked perfectly. There was still no message directed at him. He tried to reason it out, and decided he was dead. He began cutting down on his eating, and planting more tomatoes and pumpkins frantically. There would be another ship up, to try it again, but it was going to take longer, probably. He'd have to survive until it landed, and then prove he wasn't dead by reaching it. He couldn't understand why they didn't hear his calls, since the radar seemed to transmit okay. But he could find out all about it when the next ship landed.

By the beginning of 1949, he was sick of pumpkins and tomatoes, and beginning to wonder. That was when he started looking up at Earth and cursing it. It wasn't until almost 1950, though, that he gave up all hope, along with attempts to understand.

It nearly broke him. But Bill Soames had been picked carefully, and he wasn't the type to give up. It

took him over two years to build a solar oven out of the supply ship parts and begin baking water out of the gypsum he finally located. Then only a trickle seemed to come from his crude pipes. He hoarded it painfully, beginning to fill his fuel tanks.

He had to stop to find minerals to enrich the hydroponic tanks. He wasted days and weeks lying sick and near death from exposure, exhaustion, and near-starvation. He developed deficiency troubles, and he refused to give in to them. He never thought of failure. They'd abandoned him, and he cursed Earth with every weakened breath. But he was going back.

Finally, he stripped the ship of every drop of water he could spare, leaving himself almost none. He had already moved most of the plants into a crude hot-house outside. Now he drained their tanks, and decided that, added to what he had got from the gypsum, he had fuel enough.

In the spells of sickness, he had lost track of time. But he was fairly sure it was near the end of April, 1952, when he finally blasted off and headed back for Earth.

The ship was pointing ahead towards the cloud-filled atmosphere now. Soames dropped his hand from the crank, shaking with exhaustion, and waited for the first sign of air outside. He was falling fast, but that couldn't be helped.

He let the weakness grip him for a moment longer, while cold sweat stood out on his forehead, and time seemed to hang still in his frozen mind. Then he reached for the controls that would guide the ship down on its stubby wings.

The controls resisted faintly when he touched them. The refrigerator inside the ship was whining, and he knew the hell must be hot already. This was familiar ground—he'd piloted experimental rocket planes enough to have the feel of supersonic flight. It was a matter of keeping the ship up in the superthin air until it began

to lose speed, then letting it glide down to a landing.

He should hit somewhere inside the Atlantic Coast, from his rough calculations. He might do damage there—but the chances were against it. Anyhow, they hadn't thought of him for four long years—they'd have to take their chances now.

The ship was getting hot inside. He fought against the controls, trying to hold it just inside the atmosphere until its speed came down enough. The clouds below were lost from his sight. He stole a quick glance at the thin section of hull he could see. It wasn't glowing yet.

He fought mechanically, with his mind buried somewhere down in its deepest sections, trying not to think. The ship groaned, and the stubby wings seemed about to fall off. Somewhere to the rear, something gave with the sound of an express rifle. The ship grew hotter. The thin, worn coveralls were wet with his sweat, and the wristwatch seemed to burn his skin.

Then the speed was dropping, and he was going into his glide.

He came down through the clouds, finally, just as he left the darkness behind. His eyes darted to the little port that would show the surface below. He should be nearing the coast.

Soames' gasp was a hoarse choke. The line that separated sea and land was directly below him! He'd overshot. He drew back on the control, trying to steepen the glide, but it was already too late. The ship went plunging down through the air, heading out to sea. He cursed to himself, but there was nothing to be done in the time left. He began a slow turn, but he knew it would fail.

He was miles from land when the first sound of water slapping against the ship reached his ears. She was coming down smoothly enough. Spray leaped up, and the ship lurched as the braking force of the sea hit it while it still was making better than

200 miles per hour. But he managed to avoid being thrown forward. Then she was skipping a bit, with the sound of rifle-like popping coming from the rear again. A moment later, the ship was coasting smoothly over the fairly calm sea.

He was down—home—back to Earth—and alive!

And brother, would the brass hats have some explaining to do now!

Wetness touched his bare feet. He jerked his eyes down, to see an inch of water on the "floor" of the ship—and it was rising as he looked. The ship had sprung a leak during the battle through the air and the pounding of the landing. Now it would sink almost at once.

Bill threw the straps of the seat off and was on his feet, jumping for the airlock as he saw it. With a leak, this thing would sink like a piece of lead. He grabbed down his good-luck charm as he went. The sheaf of hundred dollar bills—eight in all—had been left from the going-away present his mother had sent him, and he'd forgotten them until half way out from Earth. Somehow, they had always been a symbol that he'd get back—but now, if he lived, they'd be of more immediate use. He reached for the packet of exposed film, but the water was coming up too fast; it touched the control-board and the films slid along the wet surface and vanished. There was no time to grope for them.

Soames struggled through the water as the little lock finally opened. He pulled himself out. The land was lost from view, and the sea was all around him.

But there was no time to wait. He jumped into the water and began paddling frantically. It was icy cold, and it shocked his body, driving the breath from his lungs. In his emaciated condition, keeping afloat was going to be hard work. Eight miles . . .

It never really occurred to him that he couldn't make it. He was heading toward the land when the suction of

the ship's sinking caught him, and he didn't look back. He settled down to the best compromise between endurance and speed he could make and drove on. He was back on Earth, and they couldn't defeat him now.

Fifteen minutes later, the boat appeared. It was a Coast Guard cutter, he saw. It circled, and a line was tossed to him. On the rail, he could see the figures of men. All the loneliness of the long years on the Moon hit at him, then. He pulled on the line, dragging forward; it wasn't the thought of rescue, but the sound of human voices that drove him now.

"I'm Bill Soames," he began shouting, over and over.

They pulled him up, crying something to him—something about luck that had let them see his plane going down on their radar screen. But he hardly heard the words.

"I'm Soames," he repeated. "Major William Soames. Goddamn it, can't you understand? That was a rocket ship—the Lunatic. I've come back from the Moon. Four years—four damned long years—but I've come back."

"Shock," one of the men said. "Okay, Bill, take it easy. You'll be all right."

He shrugged off their hands. "I am all right. Damn it, don't you even remember me? I took off for the Moon in 1948—July 1, 1948! Now I'm back!"

He saw consternation on their faces and pity mixed with it. He shook his head. After all the publicity there had been, it hardly seemed that a man on Earth could help knowing about the trip. Yet maybe these men hadn't heard. Maybe they didn't care about rockets and the Moon.

"Didn't get a rocket out of the atmosphere until February, 1949," the Coast Guardsman said slowly. "That was when they shot the Wac Corporal up, using the V-2 to carry her. Got up about 250 miles, as I remember it. Brother, this is 1952—not 1975

You've been seeing too much fantasy on the television. Come on, we'll fix up a bunk."

A fine welcome for a hero, Bill thought. He'd expected his name to be enough to stop them cold. Now something was stopping him . . . tired . . . everything getting black . . . so tired, so dead . . . He felt himself falling, but was too far gone into unconsciousness to care.

They held him two weeks in the hospital. The semi-starvation and the exhaustion had added to the shock of the cold swim. But he hadn't been delirious, as they claimed. He'd recovered the first night. Maybe he had raved a little—surely among all those doctors and nurses, one should have known about the take-off of the Moon ship, or should have known his name. They'd pretended to, after a while; but he knew they had been lying. They really believed all that guff about Man still being unready for Space!

He finished his lunch and reached for the dessert. Then he shuddered violently, and shoved it away. Pumpkin pie! His stomach seemed to turn over at the sight of it, and he pushed it as far from him as he could. Tomatoes and pumpkins were no longer fit to eat, as far as he was concerned.

He reached for the book on the table again. *Rockets, Missiles, and Space Travel*, by Willy Ley. He'd read the original version of it in 1947. This edition bore the date of 1951. It had a good deal of new material and all the charm and sound thinking he expected of Ley. But it didn't fit with his memory of a big, black-haired man who had boomed out farewells to him while he climbed the ramp for the take-off. Ley wasn't just an expert—he was an enthusiast, and nobody wanted space-travel more than he did.

Yet the book contained no mention of Bill's flight. It didn't list the method of turning water to monatomic hydrogen and ozone for rocket fuel, discovered in 1946; there was

nothing on the first compact atomic motor to provide power, built late in 1947. Both had been highly secret at the time, but they had been announced publicly before his flight.

He'd expected to find proof of his facts in the book. Instead, he found only confusion for his mind. They couldn't have covered up that thoroughly. Yet the date of February 24, 1949 was listed for man's first step beyond the atmosphere—the same 250 mile flight the Coast Guardsman had mentioned.

Soames sighed, and dropped the book as the nurse came for his tray, the eternal mechanical smile on her lips. "Dr. Willoughby will see you soon," she told him.

He'd tried to talk to her, but he knew it was useless. These people really didn't know about his trip. It should have been on the front pages of every newspaper in the world, and there shouldn't be a literate person alive who didn't know of it. Instead, they had treated his facts as the ravings of a man suffering from shock.

What could account for something big enough to suppress such news—not only to suppress it, but to kill what had already gone before?

Even his former commanders had failed him. He'd been refused the right to send a telegram, but the Coast Guardsman who had visited him had promised to mail his letters to the men of Operation Space. General Bartley should have come tearing in, threatening to rip the place apart unless he was released at once. But the letters had vanished, if they had ever been mailed, without an answer.

Dr. Willoughby came in quietly. "Well, young man, how do you feel today? Still think you're chasing girls on the moon heh?"

Soames wanted to push the smiling face back into the man's adenoids, but he managed to grin. In hospitals, you had to grin. He'd learned already that patients had to humor doctors and nurses and agree to anything they suggested.

"No more of that," he answered. "I still can't remember, but I'm sane enough. When do I get out of here?"

The doctor seemed to consider it weightily. "Well, now, I guess we can let you go. You did some fearful things to that body of yours—just what I can't tell; but you're well enough now. A little amnesia, of course, but that will wear off. Such cases happen from shock. You sure you want to leave?"

"I certainly am. I can get a job . . ."

The doctor wasn't listening. He nodded without waiting to hear the answer. "The nurse will bring you clothes, and then lead you to my office. I'll have some papers there. And there's a Colonel Hadley to see you."

He was gone before Soames' shout could get from his throat. So the Army had his letters! The hospital must have been holding him until Hadley could get there. They'd been stalling, but not for the reason he had expected. Now his troubles would soon be over.

He signed for the clothes they had bought at his order and the property they held for him. The clothes were picked without taste, as if some store had packaged them at random. He looked more human when he finished shaving. His face was still gaunt and tense, and his hair was thin and white as it had grown in after a long bout of illness. But he felt almost himself again as he followed the girl to the doctor's office.

Willoughby introduced him and withdrew discreetly. Colonel Hadley was a plump, youngish man, with the rocky face and false pleasantness that could carry a man to his position quickly, but would never let him advance much beyond it. He obviously had no imagination, and couldn't trust it in others.

He got down to business at once. "These your letters? Umm. Well, I've been talking to Dr. Willoughby. Understand you were pretty sick. So we won't discuss this nonsense about

the moon. In fact, under the circumstances, perhaps we can forget . . ."

"Did you ever hear of Major William Soames?" Bill asked. "Before this, I mean?"

"Certainly. That's what made Bartley send me up here, instead of routine procedure. Naturally, Soames was on Bartley's flight over Berlin when the Nazis got him. Brave man. Saved Bartley's life. Got a posthumous Congressional Medal, you know. A hero."

"He—he died?"

"Right. May 23, 1943. Sad business. Had a brother—Lieutenant Roger Soames—on the same flight. Both got it."

Bill Soames let his legs lower him carefully into a chair, studying the Colonel's face. It wasn't the face of a man who could lie. It was the face of a man reporting hard fact that he knew to be true. Yet it was the sheerest nonsense. Bill had started on that flight—but his plane had developed motor trouble half an hour out from England and he'd put back. He'd always felt he was somehow to blame for Roger's death. He tried to say something, but no words would come.

"Very sad," Hadley added. "Never knew Major Soames, but I got on well with his brother. Saw the whole business myself. Felt sick for a whole day afterwards—first Roger, then the Major." He cleared his throat. "You can guess what we thought when we heard you were impersonating him. Naturally, we had to investigate. Crank letters come often enough, but not like that. Deuce of it was that Bartley swore it was like the Major's handwriting. And you know, you do look a little like the pictures I saw. . . . Know what happens to anyone who impersonates an Army officer, young man? Bad. But—well, Dr. Willoughby tells me it was just shock. What about that?"

"I'm—I'm Bill Soames," Soames answered, while his head went around in crazy circles. He tried to pretend

it was a gag to himself, but it wasn't. He fell back on the lying that had finally convinced the staff of his sanity. "I—I guess I must have been kind of a hero worshipper; when I got the shock, I thought I was the other William Soames—and went all the way on the hero stuff. If I caused you any trouble, . . ."

"You did. You certainly did. Two days up here, checking your finger-prints, doing nothing. Prints don't match, of course. Took me a whole day in Washington just getting Soames' prints, too, you know. Funny, you'd think they'd be careful with the records of a hero; almost lost! Heh! Well, anyhow, I guess we can close the case. No sign of fraud. Hope you get your full memory back."

He stood up to go, and Bill got to his feet. He took the other's perfunctory handshake and watched him leave. He saw Willoughby come in, beaming. There must have been some exchange of words, though he couldn't remember them. Then the papers were signed, and he was going out of the hospital. The sun was shining brightly as he came down the steps, mechanically counting out the four hundred odd dollars he had left.

It had to be hypnotism. Hadley had thought he was telling the truth. But they had hypnotic drugs now. They might use them, if they wanted to pretend a man who'd flown to the Moon had been dead years before. If General Bartley had meant to send Soames a warning that the subject was top secret, and to go slow . . . if he'd been unable to come himself. . . .

It still didn't make sense. It hadn't made sense when they had abandoned him on the Moon, and it made less now. What national danger could possibly be averted by lying about this—particularly when they were still talking about the fact that the first nation to get a base on the Moon would rule Earth?

There was only one answer. He

had to see Bartley in person. He was due in Washington, it seemed—overdue by some four years.

Seeing Bartley proved to be more trouble than he'd thought. The Pentagon wasn't open to casual visitors—not the part he wanted. He couldn't use his own name, either. But even Generals are human beings. They eat, and they have to have places to sleep. Soames gave up direct efforts, and waited patiently.

He was lucky. He spotted Bartley getting into a car alone on the third day, just as he was driving up to park his own rented car. He could tell the way the gears ground that the man was bound for the old familiar place. Bartley was short and plump, a little Santa Claus of a man with fierce black hair and a totally unconvincing bristle of a mustache. When he was angry, he looked more jovial than ever—which was probably why he had his favorite bar well out in Bethesda, away from the usual run of other officers.

Soames kept a casual eye on the car, but he was sure of himself when Bartley headed out Wisconsin Avenue. He drove into the little parking lot just as Bartley disappeared into the pleasant bar across the way. Then he took his time. The General would need a beer by himself before he could be approached. When Bill finally went in, he found the place almost unchanged. He ordered his own beer and moved back to the juke-box. Bartley was sitting beside it. He set his beer on the table, and began feeding nickels into the machine. None of the new tunes meant anything to him, but luck was still with him. There was one of the old platters there—"A Long, Long Trail." He let it start, and saw Bartley glance up.

Soames had worn a hat to cover his hair, but he had carefully turned his face to the light. Now he saw Bartley's eyes slip to his own, and hesitate. He smiled faintly, drew an

answering doubtful smile, and slipped into the booth. The other man offered no objections. "Beer here is worth coming a long ways for," Bill said casually. "Worth a quarter million miles."

The General smiled doubtfully, then frowned as if the joke escaped him. It was a good act, Bill had to admit. "Good beer," he finally admitted. "Like the stuff the Germans had for their officers—almost."

"Honigsbrau." Bill agreed. "A couple of cases of it. They'd just started to crack it and drink when we strafed 'em. It was warm by the time we reached the shack, but it was worth all the trouble we had."

The General nodded. "Good. Dark and heavy stuff. I can still taste it. Used to . . ."

His mouth fell open, making him look more than ever like a comic cherub. "Good God! Man, you couldn't be! You . . . Bill Soames!"

Bill nodded, and the fears washed away. "In the flesh, Tom. I had a helluva time getting back—I'm still mad about being left there. But I knew you'd be glad to see me!"

"Glad! You sunovagun! We knew you were dead. You couldn't have lived in that smash-up, Bill!" He was pumping Bill's hands, his own arm jerking spasmodically. "Man, wait'll they hear about this!"

"They don't seem to want to hear about it," Bill told him.

"They will, boy, they will! We didn't go through the war together for nothing!"

"Or Operation Space? Remember how we used to dream about that, when I found you were human enough to read those stories. Rockets—space . . . We didn't think then . . ."

Bartley sighed. "Yeah. And when the V-2's fell into our hands, I did a lot more dreaming, Bill. It was tough, not getting assigned to White Sands. I really wanted to work on the rockets. But I guess they knew

what they were doing when they turned me down."

"They turned you down?" Hell, Tom Bartley had been the one to get him in, after his first application was turned down. Bartley had been the first officer picked for the job.

"They did, I guess I forgot about your being somewhere in Germany—Say, when did you get back? And how? Come on, give."

Bill sat back, staring at him. It was his turn to sit with his mouth open. He glanced up to see if anyone else could have come near to cut off the honesty he'd found here before. They were alone. The bartender was at the other end, and all the booths were deserted.

"Okay," he said, "I guess you had some reason for the game, but not between us, Tom. Leaving me up on the Moon without answering my signals was a dirty trick. It took me four years to get back, and then I cracked your precious ship into the ocean, where the salt water can eat its magnesium to bits. But it's time to stop the pussy-footting. You know damned well I never cracked up on the Moon. I've left my signature up there. Now I'm back. And I want some explanations."

Bartley's face had gone white, and now was turning fiery red. His hand around the beer glass tautened until the glass snapped. Blood seeped out on his fingers, but he didn't look at it. Finally he took a deep breath.

"For a minute you fooled me," he began in a deadly quiet voice. "For a minute. I was fool enough to think Bill Soames had managed to live somehow, when I knew he'd burned up in the plane. But I should have remembered those damned letters. You fooled Hadley—he thought you were sick, not crazy. But you can't fool me. You damned rotten . . ."

The fist that landed in Bill's face hardly traveled six inches, but it was backed by sheathes of muscles that only looked like fat. Bill's head

snapped back against the rear of the booth, while hot pain lanced through him. He slid down, barely holding onto his aching consciousness. He heard Bartley get up and dash to the phone. He heard the crisp orders to come for him.

For a second, he wanted to lie there and let them get him. There was nothing left. The others could be fooled or try to fool him—but Tom Bartley wouldn't do that. That blow had been based on real feelings. Bartley had believed he'd never worked at White Sands. And generals weren't hypnotized, even for security.

Then the stubbornness that had carried him through four years of desertion on the Moon and brought him back alive came to the surface. He shook the blackness away from his head, sending up lancing pains, and got to his feet. The beer bottle was under his hand. He lifted it, and threw it, four feet behind Bartley. As the man turned toward it, his legs drove him forward. He was out of the bar, and across the street. He threw a bill at the parking attendant, and gunned his rented car to life. Then he began twisting crazily through side streets. Washington wouldn't be healthy for him after this.

He had no time to think, but his mind had already been made up. There was one place and only one where he could go. And he'd better get started there fast.

The key that had been with his wallet—the stuff he'd forgotten to leave behind when he took off—still fitted the lock. He opened the door of the quiet apartment when no one answered his knock. The furniture was mostly the same, and there were pictures of himself and Roger on the piano. He called, but there was no answer. Then he moved back toward the windows that opened on Central Park South.

It was hard to believe, after the war the tests, and the Moon, that he'd grown up here, in the quiet luxury of the money his father had left

them. But he found his old room still as it had been the last day before he left. He closed the door on it quickly; it brought back too much that he'd forgotten.

He found a chair near the door and settled down to wait. The rest of the world might deceive him. Even Tom Bartley might lie—he'd left Bill on the Moon, and he probably had enough guilt feelings from that to account for anything. But Bill knew that his mother wouldn't lie to the craziest stranger. Surely he'd find the truth here. She had never understood his craving for adventure beyond Earth, and she wouldn't know too much about advances in the world. But she'd accept him. All their lies about his having died over Berlin wouldn't mean anything to her, after they'd spent so many week-ends here when the war was over. She'd remember the ring on his finger that had been her idea, to help him cut his way out of a Nazi prison if he was captured; she'd thought that diamonds were safe and that they could cut steel bars as well as glass. She'd remember the thousand dollars that had been meant to give him a grand party with the men, since he insisted on being fool enough to try to reach the Moon. She'd been tearful then, but she'd seen something of his drive, and had seemed proud of him, at the end.

He sat there, soaking up peace and quiet from the room around him. The sunlight disappeared from the windows at the far end, and there was a bit of gloom that finally ended when the street-lights went on. They left the room thick with shadows, and rich with the fancies he'd woven around them when he was only a kid, playing with Roger. He made no effort to turn on the light, but waited quietly.

Then he heard the elevator stop, and her feet on the floor of the hall. He was still sitting as the key turned in the lock, and a beam of light struck him. She closed the door quietly,

looking older and frailer than he remembered, but still upright and carrying herself with the ordered pride of good breeding.

She snapped on the lights and turned to face him. For a moment, surprise struck her. Then she mastered herself. "Good evening, young man. How did you get in here?" Her voice was firm, but calm enough, as if this were a minor upset in some fond routine.

He stood up, moving toward the light. She watched him, then smiled doubtfully. "If you're a burglar, you're quite welcome to what money I have here. Only don't make any commotion, please. I can't stand vulgarity." She was trying to make a joke of it, he knew. Then her voice caught. "But you . . . you look like . . ."

"Hi, Mom," he said, nodding.

She stood there, suddenly old and shrunken, though her back was straighter than ever. Her perfectly applied make-up was ghastly on her white face. She backed against the door slowly, while her hand went to her throat.

"You look like Bill—like Bill—like Bill. Just like Bill." It was a soft moan, unconscious. "Bill was a nice boy. He died in the war—the same time Roger died. It wasn't fair. He died—they told me he died horribly. And they sent me his papers, what was left—and half a letter he'd begun—and they gave him a medal. He was such a nice boy. I saved them all . . . I . . ."

She began to fall, still stiffly. Bill caught her in his arms, and eased her on to a couch. He'd never seen her faint before. He knew she hadn't fainted when she'd heard that Roger had been killed. He stood helpless. Finally he lowered her head and raised her feet, waiting for her to come to. His eyes moved to the drawer where she'd stared, the drawer under the two smaller pictures from their childhood.

He found them all there—the death notice, with its accusing date, half of a letter he actually had written—but completely—his papers, and some knicknacks that seemed to have been in a fire!

He pawed through them quickly, and then went back to the couch. He knew what he had to do, and began rummaging into his few belongings. He was rubbing her forehead when she came to. She looked at him, but he was holding his face as taut as he could, to build up the lines that the hard years had put on it. She shook her head slowly.

"You're—not . . ."

"No, ma'am. I guess I forgot, calling you 'Mom' the way Bill always did. He was my buddy, you know. Used to laugh at how we look alike. A great guy. We were in prison over there together. That's why I came back, to bring you this—all he had left when he died. But he didn't die in the plane, ma'am. They shot him trying to escape, and it was quick and painless. That's why I came here, why I had his key . . ."

He'd rehearsed it in his mind, but hadn't known whether it would work. Now he saw life come back into her. She drew herself up, and straightened her hair. Her voice was calm again. "Silly of me, of course. I—I'm glad you came. I never did believe Bill died in the plane. He was so much at home in any kind of machinery. Thank you for bringing my picture back to me. And now, can't I get you a drink, before I apologize for being so weak?"

He shook his head. "I'll have to rush, ma'am. I waited too long. Bill wanted you to have the picture—it was what he valued most. But—well, I have got to rush."

She let him go. She was not the sort to hold any nervous man against his will. She saw him to the door, and her fingers rested briefly on his arm. The smile she gave him would have been reward enough, if his story had been true.

Then he went down the stairs and out into the night on this world which had erased him and which refused to admit he had ever left it.

There had been another picture in his wallet, but he'd been a fool to look at it. He'd looked at it often enough that first year up there, wondering whether she'd wait for him, but somehow the memory of Sherry had grown weak with time. He'd been a bigger fool to spend the night making phone calls to locate her.

He knew it now as he sat on the too-lavish couch. He'd heard a faint gasp when she first saw him, but she'd never thought he was Bill Soames, and he hadn't tried to tell her he was. He'd used the same line on her as he'd finally used on his mother, with a change in the picture. It sat on the table near her now, its water-stained younger image of her face staring up.

She slid a trifle sideways, exposing one knee from under her negligee, and reached across him for her drink. She'd always had a nice bosom, and she'd always known it. She sipped the drink and put it back. "Poor Bill," she said throatily. "He was such a kid—but I guess I was too, then. I suppose he really expected me to wait for him?"

"I don't know—maybe not," Bill answered her. "Things were pretty tough in the prison."

"I meant to wait for him. But it was so long. I guess it wasn't very nice, marrying Bob Stanton just six months after Bill went overseas, but you know how it is. And then we heard Bill had died, but I was just having Junior . . ."

"Junior?" Bill jerked at that, his eyes flickering over the slightly too-decorated room. She couldn't have had a child in 1943—she had waited for him; she'd promised to wait again when he left for the rocket in 1947. And imagination wouldn't supply a child .

She laughed and pointed to a picture of a boy of about eight. "He's

away at school now, of course. You know how important it is give them the best education." She sighed, and reached for the drink. "But it's terribly hard on a boy's mother, having him away. The place gets so lonely, now that Bob's away in Washington so much of the time. Sometimes I think I'll go mad . . ."

She wasn't even subtle about it. For a moment, it worked. Bill had spent too long away from women. Then the ease of her passion was too much for him; it told him too strongly what a fool he'd been ever to believe her accounts of the missing dates that had always come between them. He pushed her away, pulled her negligee shut firmly, and added insult to injury by making no attempt to turn his eyes away.

She was just switching from surprise to querulous hurt as his feet carried him across the living room to the foyer. Her voice was rising to a shriek of outraged anger as he closed the door behind him. This time the night air felt good. There were worse things than being marooned on the Moon. He might have come back and married her!

Then he frowned. It wasn't night, anymore, after all. The street-lights were still on, but day was breaking in the east.

He grimaced. Well, he'd gotten things out of the night. He'd found that his mother knew he was dead, and had been dead years before he took off for the Moon; he'd found the papers that had the authentic appearance of age to prove it. He'd found that the girl who'd been single and willing to wait for him in 1947 had not only been married, but had had a child in 1943 or 1944. That would take some explaining! He couldn't swear to some things about her, but he knew damned well there had been no marriage or child in the past from which he came.

It hit him, then—the stories he'd read once had been filled with the idea that time is a matter of multiple

choice, and that the future is a fan-shaped thing, with many branches. If he'd gone to the Moon from one such probability world and somehow gotten switched over to another on the return—a world where he had never left . . .

He shrugged. It was fine for speculation, but there was no way to account for such a switch. Anyhow, that stuff was based on the need for a good story-gimmick, and not on facts. There was a lot more sense in a universe where there was an absolute relation between cause and effect. This was the same world he'd left—however much deceit was involved, and whatever the tricks they used to deny him. It might be a crazy world, but not one of those improbable ones.

He considered that. A crazy world—or one person who was crazy. Then he grinned savagely. He didn't feel crazy. It was no solution, anyhow. If he were crazy, he wouldn't know it. The same stubbornness that had let him survive for four years on the Moon made him reject the idea at once. There had been times when the whole world was wrong and only one man was right; as far as he was concerned, this was another such case.

He came up to a newsstand and stood staring at the magazines. There were more dealing in the fantastic than he remembered, but they looked familiar. Space-ships and weird landscapes vied with half-nude girls and bug-eyed monsters. He started to buy one, and then gave up the idea; after being up there, he didn't want someone else's guess. As for alien life-forms . . .

He thought about it for a second, but little more. Maybe some alien civilization that wanted to keep man Earthbound might suppress knowledge and even change memories; but it didn't fit the case. It would have been easier for such a race to eliminate him, or to prevent the ship ever having taken off. There was no answer there.

He bought a newspaper and went

into a coffee shop for breakfast. He still enjoyed eating real food. The sight of two eggs, over light, surrounded by crisp bacon, together with toast and coffee was better than any scene off Earth. He took his plate to a little table and began glancing through the paper as he ate. Most of the news meant nothing to him—the war beginning in Asia now so soon after the last war was something he preferred to ignore. Most of the rest of the paper was filled with things that he couldn't understand or didn't care to read. Even the comics were dull, without the continuity of regular reading.

Then he stopped, and looked back at a picture. Professor Arnold Rosenblum had delivered a lecture on the need for a space station outside Earth's atmosphere. When interviewed later at the Weldon Arms Hotel, he had stated. . .

Rosenblum had been the man who had invented the method of using water as the propellant! He'd been part of Operation Space from the beginning. If Bill could see him . . .

He knew the result. Rosenblum wouldn't remember. Yet the man was a scientist, and science isn't something that deals with belief. It sticks to facts. Bill turned it over, considering. The man might not believe a word he would have to say—yet he couldn't argue against provable facts. And to a real scientist, there were facts that could be proved!

The phone booth was in the back, and there was no trouble in getting his message put through to the scientist. Apparently men of science still didn't have to be suspicious of callers, as did movie stars. The voice at the other end was sleepy, but not hostile. "Yes?"

"Dr. Rosenblum? I'm James Cross, a former student—class of '44. I was wondering whether I could see you—about the space stations? I—" He halted his story about being a reporter, considering what he knew of the man. Then he hesitated deliber-

ately. "I—I don't have any reason to bother you, but I missed your lecture, and I couldn't get much out of the newspaper articles. For breakfast, perhaps?"

"Cross?" Rosenblum seemed to turn it over and decide names didn't matter. "Well, why not? I don't wonder you couldn't understand the newspaper account. Ten minutes—wait, where are you?"

"Ten minutes will be fine," Bill told him. "And thanks."

"Pleasure. Always glad to find someone still curious. Usually they forget after college." The phone clicked down, covering the last of a yawn. Bill went outside quickly to flag a cab.

It took fifteen minutes, but he managed to beat the professor to the lobby. Rosenblum was tall and thin, with a face like that of Lincoln, and eyes that managed to be both sharp and friendly, even with traces of sleep in them. He made no comment at not recognizing Bill.

Soames had given up expecting recognition. He ordered breakfast again, and grinned at Rosenblum's order—the scientist obviously believed in enjoying life. Then he plunged into it.

"I've been thinking that problem of fuels over, Dr. Rosenblum. You mentioned fluorine and beryllium as a theoretical ideal. What about ozone and monatomic hydrogen? Wouldn't they have a higher exhaust velocity? Maybe enough to avoid all the need for a step rocket?"

"Very fine," Rosenblum admitted with a grin, around a thick slice of ham. "Excellent—if you'll tell me how to get them and store them."

"Don't. Make them out of water. Like this." Bill pulled out a pad and began scribbling on it, mixing it with comments as he gave all that he could remember of what Rosenblum had originally discovered. He was watching for signs of suspicion, but there were none. The professor showed

interest, but no indication that this was some highly secret discovery of his own.

He studied it. "You'd need power for this, of course, Mr. Cross. But I suppose the work being done on submarine atomic motors might provide that, for a large ship. Still . . ."

Bill relaxed at the interest on the other's face. Facts—science had to deal with facts. And no casual interviewer could know enough about both fuels and atomics to reveal such information—Rosenblum would have to believe him. "I've been thinking about it. If we use a heavy-water moderated pile, but design it . . ."

He plunged into that. It was hard work, trying to remember it all, but he was sure he'd covered most of the points. Rosenblum sat back, his breakfast forgotten, nodding. Bill looked up with a final nod of his own at the scrawls on the paper. "Well?"

"Interesting. Unfortunately, it won't work. I tried to do exactly that with water for a fuel back in 1946—and it failed. The theory looks good—but it takes too much power. I had some students working on it, too. But we had to abandon the idea. As for your atomic motor . . ." He shook his head sadly. "Well, that's out of my field, but some of the material they've just released covers such an idea. I understand it isn't controllable."

"But—"

Rosenblum shook his head and began attacking his breakfast again. "Oh, I think you've done a lot of clear thinking, and I'm not calling you a fool, young man. I only wish I had a few more students like you. But you have to remember that there are hundreds of men working on these things today, and they've had these ideas, too. It's a beautiful piece of logic—but unfortunately, logic isn't everything; it won't work."

"It did work!" Bill told him grimly. "It worked when you tried it in 1946! Security be damned! I know it. I

was the guy who rode the rocket using it to the Moon and back! I tell you, I know!"

A change crept over Rosenblum's face. He studied Bill for a moment; then shook his head, making clucking sounds.

"Another one, eh? Last week it was my colleague, Dr. Dickson, who had invented a variation of this, late in 1949. Now I invented it in 1947. And, of course, the man who told him about it had been to the Moon personally, too. You don't fit the description, or I might think you were the same man. Mr. Cross, in spite of what the papers say, college professors are neither credulous idiots nor crazy."

He picked up his check, and put down change for the tip. "I have no intention of reporting you to the establishment. But I think you'd be wise to leave, at once! Good day."

Rosenblum walked toward the cashier, leaving Bill to stare down at the working diagrams that had taken him to the Moon, but had been proven not to work. Sure, science dealt in facts! It had been a beautiful theory.

The library had a complete file of the "New York Times" back through 1947. Bill had half expected to find missing issues, but they were all there. He rifled back to June, thumbing through. The advance feelers put out by the Army were there—meaningless by themselves, of course, but leading up to what was to come. He came to July, and tensed.

There were no missing headlines—but there was nothing on the flight of a rocket to the Moon. He combed July thoroughly. There was no mention of him. He went back to July 2nd, when the news should have been broken. On the front page, one of the men who had covered the take-off had a by-line story; it dealt with ordinary news, though, and would have required that the man be in New York the day before. Bill turned to the science columns—and again, a

name that had been among those covering the take-off hit his eye. But the story dealt with something totally unrelated to the flight, and again would have had to be written by a man nowhere near the take-off spot!

It took him four hours to complete his search, and netted him only one item. That stopped him when he came to it. It was in the same month; this time it was a more sensational paper, and the account was buried under a miscellaneous collection of scandals. "Ham Claims Contact With Man In Moon!" It seemed that a radio amateur had picked up a signal from someone who claimed to be marooned on the Moon, asking for supply ships. It must have been his signal!

He took it to be photostated, amazed at his violent reaction to even the this bit of evidence. His hands were trembling as he held it up and pointed out the piece. But the man who came to help him only glanced at it with amusement.

"Fortean, eh? Well, I get a kick out of such things, too. But you'll find a lot of things like this printed in the summer. That's why reporters call it the silly season, I guess." He read through it, grinning again. "Mmhmm. They ran almost the same story in 1950—I remember it, because my father was visiting us . . . You know, I had a man here a couple weeks ago who told me he sent the message. Never cracked a grin . . . Hey, mister, don't you want your stat?"

Bill went down the street slowly. He'd have to get a room, of course. And a job. His money wouldn't last forever—even if he hocked the diamond ring and his watch. Time for lunch. Hell, he wasn't hungry. He glanced at a television store, noticing that the screens looked immense, though the prices were lower than he'd thought they would ever be. But men could make progress in amusement, even if their leading scientists insisted they'd failed at work

that might have sent man to the planets, given time.

He bought a paper and skimmed it. He found the first of the "silly season" accounts on page 7, though it wasn't summer yet. It dealt with the flying saucers, of course, since they were still the current fad. He turned on. Maybe it was a lean day, and news was scarce. Three pages further he found a brief mention of a 97-year-old woman who could recite the Bible in Hebrew, though she'd never spoken a word of it in her life. Telepathy, she claimed, thought communication with a scholar who had lived two thousand years before.

He threw the paper in the disposal can, and stared up at the sign moving across the Times Building.

They'd covered up perfectly. There wasn't any real evidence left. A ship had disappeared on the Moon, but nobody had missed it. A man who waited for help was tagged as dead years before, and even his own mother could remember how he had died. Science had proved that he couldn't make the trip with the equipment he had. The papers were complete—and spurious.

It was the stuff of madness. Yet he knew inside himself he wasn't mad. Somehow, reality had been altered for everyone here. A thousand men who had seen the ship take-off now probably all knew that they had been doing something else. Papers had been changed.

Men had invented the steamboat long before Fulton. Their attempts had been buried, though some of them had worked. Leif Ericson had crossed the Atlantic and discovered America before Columbus—and the account had been lost, until the evidence was found. Had the facts been altered then? Had Ericson come home to find that everyone knew he had been in Iceland all along? And then, when the evidence was finally found, centuries later after America had been discovered again, had things been doctored up the opposite way.

so that people thought the evidence had been there all along?

What about the hot-air engine? It was known before the gasoline motor, and it had been just as good. Yet it had lain unused for decades, until after gasoline was powering every car on the road; then it had been rediscovered, and someone had scratched his head and wondered how it had been overlooked. Prontosil was developed during World War I, but the sulfa part wasn't used to kill germs until twenty years later. Penicillin had appeared and proved its germ killing power before 1930, but no one got around to using it until World War II.

Why was everything so significant overlooked? And would some man, a hundred years from now, stand on the Moon and stare down at his crude solar still, to recognise he'd been there first? Would they mysteriously find the accounts in old papers then, and wonder why they hadn't known about it before?

Or would this ultimate step of mankind be buried for good, while the race went on warring its way to destruction? A base on the Moon could spell enforced peace, if they got it in time.

Bill walked on, without purpose. He was finished. There was no use fighting now. Maybe he really wasn't Bill Soames. Maybe he'd been James Cross all along—maybe a nephew of old Robert Cross, who'd inherited a small fortune when the old man died. Gone on a hunting trip by airplane, gotten lost, half starved before he could find the plane, then landed in the ocean. Three children, one a girl with amazing dark red hair and the deepest blue eyes that could smile at a man. A vision of a pleasant apartment swam into his mind. He'd better call home . . .

He cut it off savagely. He was Major William Soames, back to a crazy Earth after four years on the

Moon. Neither his own mind nor any outside force was going to change his knowledge of that.

For a second, he was tempted to call the phone number that had been in his mind. Maybe there was such a number under the name of James Cross, and such a family. Maybe they had a convenient slot for him to fit into, just as they'd destroyed his own slot. But he couldn't fool with it. Giving in might just be what they wanted—whatever they were. He shook his head. It was too late to change his mind. The doubtful number had disappeared, along with the fantasies that went with it. He was no longer uncertain about himself, at least. Yet he knew that he had to find some kind of proof, if he didn't want the fantasy thoughts to come back.

Where could he go for specific information? How could he locate the news from all the papers, dealing with a specific subject, instead of having to plow through edition after edition, requiring a lifetime of effort?

Then he had it. There were clipping bureaus that did that for one. They could cull out everything except articles dealing with rockets, space-flight, and so on. He had no idea of the cost, but he could find out. He studied the signs along the street, and began pulling of the ring. He'd never get what it was worth—but even at a discount, five carats should be worth a considerable sum. Then he could investigate the clipping bureaus.

Again, luck changed capriciously. The ring had brought more than he'd expected—at least half of what it was worth—and he found the bureaus listed in the classified section of the phone book. Most of them obviously specialized in names, rather than subjects. Some agreed that they could get him such clippings. And one stated rather doubtfully that they had some. But the seventeenth one seemed pleasantly surprised when he broached the idea.

"How about photostats? They do you as well?"

Bill could see no reason to object to that. The voice at the end of the line became even more pleasant. "Fine. We've been making up a file on that subject. Another day, and you'd have been too late. But we can run off a copy for you tonight, and have it ready at nine tomorrow. It'll save you a lot of expense, too. We've had to get extra copies of some of the papers from back years, and that runs into money, not counting the overtime work. This way, that's all paid for, and we can be pretty reasonable."

"Nine o'clock tomorrow," Bill agreed. "I suppose you'll want some money in advance?"

The voice brightened again. They made arrangements for a messenger to pick up the money in the lobby of a near-by hotel. Bill registered at the desk while waiting, using the same fictitious name he had given the agency. He was tired in a way that he'd never been during all the gruelling effort to get back to Earth. It would be easy to relax and pretend the world was right—it was hard to keep fighting it. But something in his head refused to surrender. Somehow, he was going to collect the recognition they owed him, if it took him his whole remaining life time to get it!

He should have felt better after a night's sleep, but bitterness was apparently getting to be a habit again. Nine o'clock found him outside the clipping bureau. He saw tired, lackluster women entering and punching their cards into the time clock; they began gathering up newspapers and filing towards desks, where the routine job of marking, cutting, and pasting the items began. They'd probably throw away a thousand hints of new ideas and inventions that would be buried for years or decades, and never know what they had missed—if the news was even there. They'd go on collecting the names of men who liked to see those names in print. And at

night they'd go home too tired and dreary to look up at the sky. Would it really make any difference if they knew that somewhere up there parts of a supply rocket had been turned into a solar still, so that a starved, crazy fool could come back here to bring them news nobody would believe?

"Mr. Foster?" a voice behind him said for the third time, and he suddenly remembered that he'd chosen that as his name the day before. "Ah, good morning. Everything's ready—and quite a file, too. I was looking over it last night. Strange material here—enough for a book, at least. People hear messages from the Moon, people see big ships land, people announce they've built a rocket to go to Mars. A Coast Guard yeoman even reported picking a man out of the sea who claimed he'd just come from the Moon. Something about living up there four years without air or water. People! Are you a writer?"

"Sort of." Bill evaded his question. He picked up the file with a shudder at realizing he had made the news, even if it hadn't been quite the way he'd intended.

The clerk was busy making a flourish of computing the sales tax, then counting the money. Bill picked up the bulky envelope and started to leave, just as a big, blond man entered. The clerk nodded towards him. The man who ordered this originally, he started, as if to introduce them.

But Bill didn't wait. He'd seen a quiet little bar on the corner, and he headed for it. It was nearly empty, and he found a booth off by himself, where he could go through the photostats.

Most of it was what he had expected, and it had been padded out with flying saucer stories, of course. He began weeding out the junk, keeping everything that seemed to have the faintest use. There was an account on July 1 of a kid who ran away—it made no sense until a July 8 follow-up pasted to it showed that the

kid had been found, safe enough, but swearing he'd gone to see the big rocket go up. Bill checked the date again. It was 1948, and the location had been about right. The kid could have run off to see him leave, if word had leaked. But it was no proof by itself.

"Hi," a soft voice said. The big blond man was sliding down across from him. "Hear you got a bargain. Not that I care—nothing exclusive Interested in space flight?"

Bill frowned, and then decided he could use a little chance to talk socially. "You might say so," he admitted. "Mostly about the Moon. I got interested in Professor Rosenblum's lecture. It gets to be a bit expensive as a hobby, though."

"Pays off, if you know how. That's my angle. I make process shots for the movies, now that they've gone in for this stuff. Do it cheaper and better than they can. I figured some of this might give me some ideas." The man's voice was friendly, but he seemed vaguely disappointed, as if he had expected something else from Bill.

For his own part, Bill was wondering about leaving. It had seemed to offer some possibility for interest when he'd realized that the other was sinking money into finding all he could about such things. But Bill wasn't interested in process shots. The films that had been lost on his ship were the real thing—and they showed it. No trick of photography could give the same effect.

He started to gather up the mess of photostats, but the other had signaled for more beer. "I'm Brad Wollen."

"Bill Soames," he answered automatically, and then cursed himself as the other's eyebrows lifted. "A cousin of the fellow who got the Medal of Honor, if that's what you were thinking."

Wollen nodded. "Funny. And I'm the cousin of the Army test pilot who

cracked up in that new supersonic job back in '49. Quite a coincidence, isn't it? Hey, wait a minute . . . didn't I see something about a guy who claimed he was your cousin in one of these . . ."

He began searching through the clippings busily. Bill swore hotly to himself. He'd thought his name had escaped publication—they usually left out names, in such cases. He shoved back his beer, and began framing an excuse to leave.

Then he stopped. Lying on the table was an eight-by-ten glossy picture. And it was no process shot. The lighting couldn't be duplicated. That was a shot of the Moon—the real Moon!

His hands fumbled with it as he tried to pick it up. No tricks could do that! And the rocket ship in the background was too detailed for any of the stuff they were doing now. It was different from his—but it might have been another model of the same ship, just as this picture was like the crater he'd known, though not quite the same.

"It's real!" he said slowly. "The way the light bounces, the way those rocks look eroded, yet aren't rounded off! Dam it, you can't fake that."

He realized he was being a fool as he said it, but the words piled out before he could stop them. It wasn't the stupidity that brought him to a halt, though. It was the sudden blanched shock on the other man's face. Wollen had heaved himself half out of his seat and was staring at him as if he'd just come out of hell, complete with brimstone.

"Mister, how do you know how those rocks look?" The man's voice was a hoarse whisper.

Bill sighed wearily. "Because I was the fool that took off in the first ship—in 1948, for the record. The blind fool who wouldn't die, but managed to live up there four years until I could come back here to be shown

what a real fool is. Now go ahead and laugh. Tell me you never heard of a rocket then, and that Bill Soames died over Berlin. Tell me I'm a liar now!"

"I never heard of a '48 rocket, and I did hear you died," Wollen was sinking back slowly. "But it fits—Oh, God, how well it fits. Then—you did crash in the sea!"

He didn't wait for Bill's tensed, unbelieving nod. "I was luckier. I came down in a swamp, not sixty miles from here. Make way for the hero, home from the Moon! Did they abandon you without supplies, too? Yeah. It isn't fun, baking out water, if you did it the way I did. And it isn't fun when you find you're dead—were dead before you took off, and your wife swears your kids belong to the man she married the same day she married you, and . . . But I had the films. When the guys I showed them to told me they were nice process work, I caught on fast. I came closer to starving here than up there, at first. Now—well, I'm doing all right, that way. They like my process work! Almost looks real, they tell me. The blind fools! They won't even look at the ship—they call it clever of me to make such a big mock-up for my shots!"

His voice quieted suddenly. "I've been back three months. Sometimes I begin to think I never took off from Earth at all. I get funny ideas. But all the same, I took off in 1950, and I was up there seventeen months, on food enough for less than six."

They sat staring at each other, while Bill cursed himself. It had been thrown at him—the man who had approached Rosenblum's colleague, Dr. Dickson, must have been Wollen. Rosenblum had discovered the fuel method in 1946; Dickson had found it in 1949 . . .

His eyes dropped to the clippings, but Wollen was gathering them up. "It's a nice ship, still," he said. "It needs raising upright, and a little work. But you'll like it."

It was a nice ship — a better model in some ways than Bill's had been. But they'd discussed that, and agreed it was natural. While the fuel trick had been buried, technology in other lines had advanced a little. If there was another, later ship, it would probably be better, though still not good enough.

And there was going to be another. The clippings had proved that. All the signs that Bill and Wollen could remember from their pasts were out again, obvious to those who could read the meaning. Somewhere, someone else had discovered how to use water in an atomic power plant for fuel, and they were building a ship. In another year, it would be winging up towards the Moon. And the whole story would start over again; the fuel supply rockets would not arrive, and somehow the headlines and memories on Earth would change.

Bill had a picture of thousands and millions of people scuttling about, destroying that "ridiculous" bit of evidence, or "correcting" some mistake, to hold man down from his great leap. It had been easy to keep him fooled once. The Greeks had invented a toy steam-engine twenty-five hundred years ago, and the idea had somehow been glossed over until Watt came along. It was harder now—it must take more work each time.

Whatever was causing it was losing. But that whatever might still win. Man was getting close to destruction now. He had bombs that could annihilate great masses. He had a thousand new toys of war. And he was blundering along, closer and closer to using them all.

Bill helped Wollen unload the new batch of supplies off the little truck into the shed beside the rocket. Around them, the swamp was a perfect camouflage, and the hollow into which the rocket had settled in its landing glide concealed it almost completely.

The blond man wiped his hands,

and stopped for a breather, picking up the conversation where he'd dropped it. "You can't give them—or it—a name, Bill. Maybe it's caused by aliens, in spite of what we believe. Maybe it's caused by a group right here on Earth who can control men's thoughts on any one limited subject at a time. Maybe it's some supernatural drive. I've even thought about the old idea of the mass-mind, capable of taking over the individual humanity; that would be a pretty basic, conservative force, and it wouldn't want newfangled ideas. The thing has been operating for a good many thousand years, fighting a constant delaying action. But this is its last stand. Once we spread out, we can't be controlled—one planet will discover what the next one doesn't. It has to win now. And that means we have to win."

"We'll win," Bill answered him, and began unloading the truck again. "We've got to win, so we will."

Unconsciously, they both looked up to the sky, where the Moon would be. There was time enough for them to get the big ship righted and ready to take off. The repairs needed were minor, and the fuel for the rocket was all around them, while the atomic motors were good for at least one more trip. They'd make the Moon, and still have some leeway to manoeuvre about, or to jump from one crater to another.

Men had struggled with electricity and tamed it before they knew what it was. They'd been fighting gravity for millenia, whenever they did work, and still knew nothing about it, really. They knew nothing about their

own minds and the minds of the larger groups being studied in mob psychology, beyond a hint and a suggestion. Men somehow always had to beat down the opposing forces and only learn what they were after the battle was won.

It didn't matter what had been doing it. Maybe they'd never know. Or maybe they'd learn as soon as it was finally overcome. All they had to do was fix it so they couldn't lose.

In another year, the third rocket would go up. This time two men would be watching for it from the Moon—men in a worn space-ship, who'd spent months baking out supplies of water from gypsum for fuel. Bill and Wollen would be ready. They'd ferry the fuel to wherever the next ship landed, and the new ship could head back for Earth less than a day after it touched the Moon.

That wouldn't leave time enough for the records to be changed and old memories replaced with false ones.

Bill grinned to himself. So he'd be a hero, after all, with his supposed-death probably explained as a cover-up for his initial flight. They'd find some way to explain it all, of course.

He shouldered another load of hydroponic tanks to replace those Wollen had left on the Moon, and his face sobered. It would take more than heroism. It would take men too stubborn to have good sense.

"Pumpkins!" he said with a new depth of feeling. "Tomatoes!"

He carried the tanks into the ship and began bolting them down, ready for an early planting.

THE END.

THE FENCE

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

There are two sides to any fence, even an invisible one. But can you be sure which is really the inside?

HE came down the stairway into the hushed sanctuary of the lounge and stood for a moment to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the perpetual twilight of the place.

A robot waiter went past, tall glasses balanced on the tray.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Craig," he said.

"How are you, Herman?" asked Craig.

"Will you wish something sir?"

"No thank you," said Craig. "I'm going out directly."

Herman left. Craig crossed the room and he walked almost on tiptoe. He realized now, for the first time, that he almost always walked on tiptoe here. The only noise that ever was allowed was a cough and even then it must be a cough that was most discreet. To have spoken to anyone within the confines of the lounge would have been high treason.

The ticker stood in one corner of the room and, in the keeping with the place, it was an almost silent ticker. The tape came out and went into a basket, but the basket was well watched and often emptied and the tape never, never spilled out on the carpet.

He picked up the strand of tape and ran it through his fingers, bending low to read the characters, backing through the alphabet until he came to C and then he went more slowly.

Cox, 108½; Cotton, 97; Colfield, 92; Cratchfield, 111½; Craig, 75 . . .

Craig, 75!

It had been 78 yesterday and 81

the day before and 83 the day before that. A month ago it had been 96½ and a year ago 120.

He stood with the tape in his hand and looked out over the room. The place seemed, at first glance, to be deserted. But as he looked, he saw them. There was a bald head peeking over the back of one chair and over the back of another rose a telltale trail of smoke from an invisible cigar. There was one who sat facing Craig, but he seemed so much a part of the chair that at first he seemed invisible. He sat quietly, with his gleaming black shoes and white shirt front and the folded paper held stiffly before him.

Craig turned his head slowly and saw, with a sinking feeling, that there was someone in his chair, just three removed from the right wing of the fireplace. A month ago it would not have happened, a year ago it would have been unthinkable. His personal satisfaction had been high, then.

But they knew that he was slipping. They had seen the tape and talked about it. And they felt contempt for him despite their mealy mouths.

"Poor Craig," they had said to one another. "Such a decent chap. And so young, too."

They would have been consoling. "He'll come out of it," they'd said. "It's just temporary."

And they had been quite smug about it, no doubt, sure that it was the sort of thing that would never happen to any one of them.

The counselor was kind and helpful and Craig could see at a glance that he was a man well satisfied, and that he liked his work.

"Seventy-five," he said. "That is not good, is it, Mr. Craig?"

"No, it's not," said Craig.

"You are engaged in something?" asked the counselor and he simpered just a little, a professional, polished simper that said he knew that Craig was, of course, but he had to ask.

"History," said Craig.

"Oh," said the counselor. "A most engaging subject. I have known a number of gentlemen who were quite wrapped up in history."

"I specialize," said Craig. "One acre."

"Acre?" asked the counselor, not a little puzzled. "I'm not quite sure . . ."

"The history of one acre," Craig told him. "Trace it back, you know, with a temporal viewer. Hour to hour, day to day. Record in detail, and with appropriate comment and deduction, everything that transpired upon the acre."

"Most novel," said the counselor. "I've never heard of it before."

"You do some screwy things," said Craig.

"Screwy?"

"Well, you strive for effect. You try to be spectacular, but spectacular in a scholarly way, if you understand."

"Yes, I am sure I do," the counselor said, "and yet it seems to me that the study of one acre of the Earth's surface is quite legitimate. There have been others who have limited their studies. There have been histories of families and of cities and of certain rather obscure causes and of the development and evolution of such commonplace things as teapots and coffee cups and antimacassars and such like."

"Yes," said Craig, "that is exactly what I thought."

"Tell me, Mr. Craig," asked the counselor, "have you run across anything spectacular on your . . . ah. acre?"

"I have traced the growth of trees," said Craig. "Backwards, you know. From decaying giants to saplings, from saplings to seed. It is quite a trick, this backward tracing. It is a bit confusing, but soon you get used to it I swear you finally get so that you think in reverse. And then, of course, I have kept a record of birds' nests and the birds themselves. There's one old lame robin that was quite a character. And flowers, naturally. And the action of the elements on boulders and soil. And weather. I have a fine record of the weather over several thousand years."

"Most interesting," said the counselor.

"There was a murder, too," said Craig, "but it happened just outside the boundary line, so I can't actually include it in the study. The murderer, however, did run across the acre after he committed the deed."

"A murder, Mr. Craig?"

"Exactly," said Craig. "One man killed another, you understand."

"How ghastly," said the counselor.

"I suppose it would be," admitted Craig. "But it was done, you know. The records are filled with murders."

"Anything else?"

"Not yet," said Craig, "although I have some hope. I found some old foundations."

"Buildings?"

"Yes, of buildings. Go back far enough and I'm bound to find the buildings before they went to ruin. That might be interesting. There might be people in them. One of the foundations looked like a residence. Had what appeared to be the footing for a fireplace."

"You might hurry it up a bit," suggested the counselor. "Get there a little faster. People are most interesting."

Craig shook his head. "To make the study valid, I must record in detail. I can't slight the detail to get what's interesting."

The counselor managed to look sorrowful.

"With such an interesting project," he said, "I can't understand why your rating should go down."

"I realised," said Craig, "that no one would care. I would spend years at the study and I would publish my findings and I would give copies to my friends and acquaintances and they would thank me and put the book up on the shelf and never take it down again. I would deposit copies in libraries and you know yourself that no one ever goes to libraries. The only one who would ever read the thing would be myself."

"Surely, Mr. Craig," comforted the counselor, "there are other men who have found themselves in a like position. And they have managed to remain relatively happy and contented."

"That is what I've told myself," said Craig, "but it doesn't work for me."

"We could go into many of the closer aspects of the case," said the counselor, "but I think we should leave that until some future time if it proves necessary. We'll just hit the high points now. Tell me, Mr. Craig, are you fairly well convinced that you cannot continue to be happy with your acre?"

"Yes," said Craig. "I am."

"Not conceding for a moment," said the counselor, with dogged determination, "that your statement to that effect closes our avenue of investigation in that direction, tell me this: Have you considered an alternative?"

"An alternative?"

"Why, certainly. Some other line of work that might prove happier. I have counselled a number of gentle-

men who changed their line of work and it has proved for the best."

"No," said Craig. "I haven't the least idea what I might go into."

"There are a number of openings," said the counselor. "Almost anything you wish. There's snail watching, for example."

"No," said Craig.

"Or stamp collecting," said the counselor. "Or knitting. A lot of gentlemen knit and find it very soothing."

"I don't want to knit," said Craig.

"You could make money."

"What for?" asked Craig.

"Well, now," the counselor said, "that is something I've often wondered, too. There's no need of it, really. All you have to do to get money is go to a hank and ask for some of it. But there are men who actually set out to make money and, if you ask me, they use some rather shady methods. But be that as it may, they seem to get a great deal of satisfaction doing it."

"What do they do with it once they get it?" asked Craig.

"I wouldn't know," the counselor told him. "One man buried it and then forgot where he buried it and he remained happy the rest of his life running around with a lantern and a shovel looking for it."

"Why the lantern?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that. He never hunted it in daylight. He hunted in the night."

"Did he ever find it?"

"Come to think of it," the counselor said, "I don't believe he did."

"I don't think," said Craig, "that I'd care for making money."

"You might join a club."

"I belong to a club," said Craig. "A very fine old club. One of the very finest. Some of the best names and its history runs back to . . ."

"That's not the kind of club I mean," the counselor said. "I mean

a group of persons who work for something or who have special interests in common and band themselves together for the better enjoyment of those mutual interests."

"I doubt," said Craig, "that a club would be the answer."

"You might get married," the counselor suggested.

"What! You mean to one woman?"

"That is what I mean."

"And raise a bunch of kids?"

"Many men have done it," said the counselor. "They have been quite satisfied."

"It seems," said Craig, "on the face of it, just a bit obscene."

"There are many other possibilities," the counselor told him. "I can just run through a partial list of them and see if there is anything you might care to think about."

Craig shook his head. "Some other time," he said. "I'll come back again. I want to mull it over."

"You're absolutely sure that you're sour on history?" asked the counselor. "I'd rather steer you back to that than interest you in an alternative."

"I'm sour on it," said Craig. "I shudder when I think of it."

"You could take a vacation," suggested the counselor. "You could freeze your personal satisfaction rating until you returned. Maybe then you could boost it up again."

"I think," said Craig, "that to start with I'll take a little walk."

"A walk," the counselor told him. "is very often helpful."

"What do I owe you?" Craig asked.

"A hundred," the counselor said. "But it's immaterial to me if you pay or not."

"I know," said Craig. "You work for the love of it."

The man sat on the shore of the little pond and leaned back against

a tree. He smoked while he kept an eye on the fishpole stuck into the ground beside him. Close at hand was an unpretentious jug made of earthenware.

He looked up and saw Craig.

"Come on, friend," he said. "Sit down and rest yourself."

Craig came and sat. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"The sun's a little warm," he said.

"Cool here," said the man. "I fish or loaf around when the sun is high. When the sun goes down I go and hoe my garden."

"Flowers," said Craig. "Now there's an idea. I've often thought it would be fun to raise a garden full of flowers."

"Not flowers," the man said. "Vegetables. I eat them."

"You mean you work to get the things you eat?"

"Uh-huh," said the man. "I spade the ground and rake it to prepare the seed bed. Then I plant the seeds and watch them sprout and grow. I tend the garden and I harvest it. I get enough to eat."

"It must be a lot of work."

"I take it easy," said the man. "I don't let it worry me."

"You could get a robot," Craig told him.

"Yeah, I guess I could. But I don't hold with such contraptions. It would make me nervous."

The cork went under and he made a grab for the pole, but he was too late. The hook came up empty.

"Missed that one," he said placidly. "Miss a lot of them. Don't pay enough attention."

He swung in the hook and baited it with a worm from the can that stood beside him.

"Might have been a turtle," he said. "Turtles are hell on bait."

He swung the tackle out again

stuck the pole back into the ground and settled back against the tree.

"I grow a little extra corn," he said, "and run a batch of moon when my stock is running low. The house ain't much to look at, but it's comfortable. I got a dog and two cats and I fuss my neighbors."

"Fuss your neighbors."

"Sure," the man said. "They all think that I am nuts."

He picked up the jug, uncorked it and handed it to Craig. Craig took a drink, prepared for the worst. It wasn't bad at all.

"Took a little extra care with that batch," the man said. "It really pays to do that if you have the time."

"Tell me," said Craig. "Are you satisfied?"

"Sure," the man said.

"You must have a nice P.S.," said Craig.

"P.X.?"

"No. P.S. Personal satisfaction rating."

The man shook his head. "I ain't got one of them," he said.

Craig was aghast. "But you have to have!"

"You talk just like that other fellow," said the man. "He was around a while ago. Told me about this P.S. business, but I thought he said P.X. Told me I had to have one. Took it awful hard when I said I wouldn't do it."

"Everyone has a P.S.," said Craig.

"Everyone but me," said the man. "That's what the other fellow said, too. He was some upset about it. Practically read me out of the human race."

He looked sharply at Craig. "Son," he said, "you got troubles on your mind."

Craig nodded.

"Lots of folks have troubles," said the man, "only they don't know it. And you can't start to lick your troubles until you see and recognize

them. Things are all upset. No one's living right. There is something wrong."

"My P.S. is way off," said Craig. "I've lost all interest. I know there's something wrong. I can sense it, but I can't put my finger on it."

"They get things given to them," said the man. "They could live the life of Riley and not do a tap of work. They could get food and shelter and clothing and all the luxuries that they want by just asking for them. You want money, so you go to a bank and the bank gives you all you need. You go to a shop and buy a thing and the shopkeeper don't give a tinker's damn if you pay or not. Because, you see, it didn't cost him nothing. He got it given to him. He doesn't have to work for a living. He ain't keeping shop, really. He's just playing at it, like kids would play at keeping store. And there's other people who play at all sorts of other things. They do it to keep from dying of boredom. They wouldn't have to do it. And this P.S. business you talk about is just another play-mechanism, a way of keeping score, a sort of social pressure to keep you on your toes when there is no real reason on all of God's green earth that you should be on your toes. It's meant to keep you happy by giving you something to work for. A high P.S. means high social standing and a satisfied ego. It's clever and ingenious, but it's just playing, too."

Craig stared at the man. "A play world," he said. "You've hit it on the head. That's what it really is."

The man chuckled. "You never thought of it before," he said. "That's the trouble. No one ever thinks. Everyone is so busy trying to convince himself that he's happy and important that he never stops to think. Let me tell you this, son: No man ever is important if he tries to make himself important. It's when he forgets that he's important that he really is important."

"Me," he said. "I have lots of time to think."

"I never thought of it," said Craig, "in just that way before."

"We have no economic worth," the man said. "There's not any of us making our own way. There's not a single one of us worth the energy it would take to kill us."

"Except me," he said. "I raise my own eating and I catch some fish and I snare some rabbits and I make a batch of drinking likker whenever I run out."

"I always thought of our way of life," said Craig, "as the final phase in economic development. That's what they teach the kids. Man has finally achieved economic independence. There is no government and there is no economic fabric. You get all you need as a matter of hereditary right, a common right. You are free to do anything you want to do and you try to live a worth-while life."

"Son," said the man, "you had breakfast this morning and you had lunch this noon before you took your walk. You'll eat dinner tonight and you'll have a drink or two. Tomorrow you'll get a new shirt or a pair of shoes and there will be some equipment that you'll need to carry on your work."

"That's right," said Craig.

"What I want to know," said the man, "is where did all that stuff come from? The shirt or the pair of shoes might have been made by someone who likes to make shirts and shoes. The food was cooked either by robots or by someone who likes to cook, and the drawing set or the typewriter or the power tools that you use might have been made by someone who likes to mess around making stuff like that. But before the typewriter was a typewriter, it was metal in the ground, the food was grown, the clothes came from one of several raw materials. Tell me: who grew the raw materials, who dug and smelted the ore?"

"I don't know," said Craig. "I never thought of that."

"We're kept," said the man. Some one is keeping us. Me, I won't be kept."

He pulled in the tackle and twirled the pole to wrap the line around it.

"Sun is getting down a bit," he said. "I got to go and hoe."

"It was good talking to you," said Craig, getting up.

"Nice path over that way," said the man, pointing. "Good walking. Lots of flowers and it's shaded, so it'll be nice and cool. If you go far enough, you'll reach an art gallery." He looked at Craig. "You're interested in art?"

"Yes," said Craig. "But I didn't know there was a gallery anywhere around."

"Well, there is," said the man. "Good paintings." Some wood statuary is better than average. A few pieces of good jade. Go there myself when I have the time."

"Well, thanks," said Craig.

"Funny looking building," the man said. "Group of buildings, really Architect who designed them was crazier than a coot, hut don't let it prejudice you. The stuff is really good."

"There's plenty of time," said Craig. "I'll drop in and have a look. Thanks for telling me."

The man got up and dusted off his trousers seat.

"If you're late in getting back," he said, "drop in and spend the night. My shack is just across the way. Plenty of grub and there is room for two to sleep."

"Thank you," said Craig. "I may do it."

He had no intention of accepting the offer.

The man held out his hand. "My name is Sherman," he said. "Glad you came along."

They shook hands.

Sherman went to hoe his garden and Craig walked down the path.

The buildings seemed to be quite close and yet it was hard to make out their lines. It was because of some crazy architectural principle, Craig decided. Sherman had said the architect was crazier than a coot. One time when he looked at them, they looked one way; when he looked again they were different somehow. They were never twice the same.

They were pink until he decided that they weren't pink at all, but were really blue; there were other times when they seemed neither pink nor blue, but a sort of green, although it wasn't really green.

They were beautiful, of course, but it was a disturbing beauty—a brand new sort of beauty. Something, Craig decided, that Sherman's misplaced genius had thought up, although it did seem funny that a place like this could exist without his ever hearing about it. Still, such a thing was understandable when he remembered that everyone was so self-consciously wrapped up in his work that he never paid attention to what anyone else was doing.

There was one way, of course, to find out what it was all about and that was to go and see.

The buildings, he estimated, were no more than a good five minutes' walk across a landscaped meadow that was a thing of beauty in itself.

He started out and walked for fifteen minutes and he did not get there. It seemed, however, that he was viewing the buildings from a slightly different angle, although that was hard to tell, because they refused to stay in place but seemed to be continually shifting and distorting their lines.

It was, of course, no more than an optical illusion.

He started out again.

After another fifteen minutes he was still no closer, although he could have sworn that he had kept his course headed straight toward the buildings.

It was then that he began to feel the panic.

He stood quite still and considered the situation as sanely as he could and decided there was nothing for it but to try again and this time pay strict attention to what he was doing.

He started out, moving slowly, almost counting his steps as he walked, concentrating fiercely upon keeping each step headed in the right direction.

It was then he discovered he was slipping. It appeared that he was going straight ahead but, as a matter of fact, he was slipping sidewise as he walked. It was just as if there were something smooth and slippery in front of him that translated his forward movement into a sidewise movement without his knowing it. Like a fence, a fence that he couldn't see or sense.

He stopped and the panic that had been gnawing at him broke into cold and terrible fear.

Something flickered in front of him. For a moment it seemed that he saw an eye, one single staring eye, looking straight at him. He stood rigid and the sense of being looked at grew and now it seemed that there were strange shadows on the grass beyond the fence that was invisible. As if someone, or something, that he couldn't see was standing there and looking at him, watching with amusement his efforts to walk through the fence.

He lifted a hand and thrust it out in front of him and there was no fence, but his hand and arm slipped sidewise and did not go forward more than a foot or so.

He felt the kindness, then, the kindness and the pity and the vast superiority.

And he turned and fled.

He hammered on the door and Sherman opened it.

Craig stumbled in and fell into a chair. He looked up at the man he had talked with that afternoon.

"You knew," he said. "You knew and you sent me to find out."

Sherman nodded. "You wouldn't have believed me if I told you."

"What are they?" asked Craig, his words tumbling wildly. "What are they doing there?"

"I don't know what they are," said Sherman.

He walked to the stove and took a lid off a kettle and looked at what was cooking. Whatever it was, it had a hungry smell. Then he walked to the table and took the chimney off an antique oil lamp, struck a match and lit it.

"I go it simple," he said. "No electricity. No nothing. I hope that you don't mind. Rabbit stew for supper."

He looked at Craig across the smoking lamp and in the flickering light it seemed that his head floated in the air, for the glow of the lamp blotted out his body.

"But what are they?" demanded Craig. "What kind of fence is that? What are they fenced in for?"

"Son," said Sherman, "they aren't the ones who are fenced in."

"They aren't . . ."

"It's us," said Sherman. "Can't you see it? We are the ones who are fenced in."

"You said this afternoon," said Craig, "that we were kept. You mean they're keeping us?"

Sherman nodded. "That's the way

I have it figured. They're keeping us, watching over us, taking care of us. There's nothing that we want that we can't have for the simple asking. They're taking real good care of us."

"But why?"

"I don't know," said Sherman.

"A zoo, maybe. A reservation, maybe. A place to preserve the last of a species. They don't mean us any harm."

"I know they don't," said Craig. "I felt them. That's what frightened me."

He sat in the silence of the shack and smelled the cooking rabbit and watched the flicker of the lamp.

"What can we do about it?" he asked.

"That's the thing," said Sherman, "that we have to figure out. Maybe we don't want to do anything at all."

Sherman went to the stove and stirred the rabbit stew.

"You are not the first," he said, "and you will not be the last. There were others before you and there will be others like you who'll come along this way, walking off their troubles."

He put the lid back on the kettle.

"We're watching them," he said, "the best we can. Trying to find out. They can't keep us fooled and caged forever."

Craig sat in his chair, remembering the kindness and the pity and the vast superiority.

THE END

RECOGNITION

By THOMAS C. PACE

The Aliens in their strange Ship were offering membership in a Galactic Federation. But it was hard to understand their message, and harder to see their reasons. In such a situation, mistakes were sure to happen.

THE cabin was far more luxurious than usual for ultra-sonic military craft; the needle-bodied ship was the official plane of a man whose shoulders carried more than an ordinary amount of brass and braid. He was not, however, aboard at present. Five distinctly unmilitary men lounged about the padded, neat cabin. Any citizen, even without recognizing them individually—and they were of a calibre to make recognition extremely likely—would have tabbed them correctly as scientists.

In spite of their poses, they were as far from being relaxed as they were from being military. Their tension showed in the vigor and frequency with which two of them smoked and crushed out and lit cigarettes . . . the thin, youthful Sacco, who was one of the world's best physicists, and the grey, ponderous Bramling, who had done more than any other man to reveal the secret of life, and had won a Nobel Prize for his work. Excitation showed in the manner in which the gaunt, balding giant Mallinson—the psychologist and sociologist, the Mallinson who had guided the U.N.'s supremely successful Dublin Peace Conference to what bid to be a turning point in world history—turned and twisted in his seat, rubbed his knees with his great hands, and blinked out a window at the grey spread of cloud and earth blurring by thousands of feet

. . . the first time any of the others had ever seen Mallinson restive.

Doicner, the tiny gnome who lived for mathematics, sat precisely straight in the rear of the cabin, turning his spare spectacles rapidly over and over in his hands. He had already broken his other pair, and the shards and bent frame lay unnoticed on the floor. He stared unseeing at the others or at the quivering floor, his eyes opaque with concentration.

Notelsky, who was a profanely superlative debater, as well as the chemist, lay stretched his full length in a lounge seat, his eyes closed and his face unusual in peaceful immobility. But his hands shook when not folded tightly across his paunch, and his still face was redder with excitement than it had ever been in the years before, when he had worked days synthesizing compounds and nights compounding revolution.

The whisper of the jets, hurling their bellow far behind them, had become more painful than silence; and Bramling's voice cracked heavily against their tensions. "What does the ship look like?"

Sacco took time to answer, speaking through his cigarette fumes. "It . . . doesn't. That is, we aren't even sure it's physical, as we aren't about them. Take the way they speak . . . communicate. The ship . . . well, you're never sure of the shape,

or even if there is a definite shape. Your impression is different from every angle, and every time you look at it. And the size . . . instruments don't agree with each other, or even with their own successive readings, on the mass and the shape."

Doener was unexpectedly a basso, rumbling out of his reverie. "Nonsense, anyway. Do you now measure an equation or a concept with instruments?"

Bramling stared at him and back to Sacco. "That means they aren't a life form as we would have postulated life."

Mallinson turned from the window. "No. We hardly see how they can even be material. Crushing to a biologist, of course. But you heard Sacco. And the Aliens themselves . . . well, no two viewers see quite the same thing, as with the ship. Two-dimensional squares of light of unrecognizable color, or multi-faceted translucent crystals, or ripples on fast-moving water. Without the water." He chuckled sharply. "Sacco says they look like sounds. Never saw one myself, but it's an apt comparison. They're totally outside our range of experience . . . so much so as to be almost completely beyond our comprehension. I wonder what we, and our world, look like to them?"

Sacco was fumbling futilely for a match. Bramling bent toward him with a lighter, and grunted. "How did you communicate, then?"

"We didn't," said Sacco, nodding thanks. "They did, we think. Telepathy. Strong, but not clear. And not directed at any one person . . . they seem to have a limited understanding of individuality . . . as nearly as we can tell. And that, of course, is our biggest communication problem. Three-fourths of what we . . . hear . . . doesn't mean anything. We can feel it but not interpret it." He smiled. "Lord knows, it's difficult enough to be certain they are communicating, much less what! And then we can never be sure how well

we are getting back to them, or just how they receive us. Yet they seem occasionally to be so clear . . ." He rubbed his forehead. "It can be extremely frustrating . . . we feel so sure, and yet not sure at all!"

"You seem to have gotten pretty far," said Notelsky gutturally, without opening his eyes. "After all, it has been only a matter of hours."

"Yes. As you know, military personnel got to them quickly after the first reports, and threw a cordon around the area and 'interviewed' them . . . involuntarily!" Mallinson packed a pipe with nervous tamping motions, hooked the curved stem in his mouth, and spoke around it and the match. "Some of the military lost all balance when the Aliens first attempted to establish communication. They fired at them—no effect evident, thank God!"

"It might have been suicidal," muttered Sacco.

Mallinson shrugged. "You can't blame the soldiers, of course. The Aliens were evidently feeling for the proper medium of communication, and the first attempts seriously affected those in the area. Several went insane. Four shot themselves . . . when they discovered that they could not shoot the Aliens. But there hasn't been any of that since the first few minutes of contact. Neither Sacco nor I have been affected—"

"You hope," said Notelsky in the tones of a demure bear.

"We hope. And have reason to believe. At any rate, when things settle down, including the wild life which can evidently 'hear' them also . . ."

"What?" asked Bramling, alert.

"Yes. A herd of mule deer came tearing out of the woods, stampeded around the 'ship' . . . trampled one man, in fact. And a snake went into convulsions in the brush, right among the men, adding considerably to their confusion and panic. I im-

gine. Birds still show extreme excitement. Not too surprising. We've found indications of telepathy in animals, ourselves. Well, the gist of their initial 'statement' was, or seemed to be, that they wanted to communicate with our scientific leaders. Evidently theirs is a society governed by scientists . . . unless perhaps they are all scientists. The officer in charge of the troops sent word to the rocketry station—probably the most confused military communiqué in history!—and Sacco flew over. He called me at San Francisco before he left, and I joined him up there."

He puffed on the pipe. "What Sacco has said about the difficulty of interpretation is understated, if anything. It's rooted in subjectivity, I believe. In our inability to correlate this experience with anything we've known, experience or tradition or instinct. It takes quite a bit of disassociation . . . but with effort we ~~think~~ we have understood them correctly, and fairly fully." His eyes glowed, suddenly.

Sacco took up the narrative. "Yes. We were told, if that is the right expression, essentially what we have told you; that their study of us, evidently going on for centuries, has led to their conviction that now, only recently, we have reached a level of racial maturity making us eligible for contact with them, in their role as representatives of a loosely knit federation . . . this federation seems to embrace numbers of races as unlike them as they are unlike us . . . and covering, apparently, this entire section of our galaxy!"

He paused, even now seeming stunned anew. Doiener lifted his head and dropped it again. There was silence, and above their plane the stars lay behind the deep blue of the sky.

"We reported to the Security Council . . . but we sent for you gentlemen even before we reported. We knew there would be no objection," Sacco finished.

"No," murmured Notelsky heavily. "There would not be."

Bramling smoked, hands locked together behind his head, looking at nothing. "Are you certain of their sincerity? Beings on their level would encounter no trouble in falsifying a mental communication with humans, though . . ."

Sacco spread his hands apart like an umpire signalling a safe slide. "You can answer it yourself. What else can we do but accept what they say as true? The only alternative would be not to accept it, and that would be unthinkable. We are, in that sense, on the blade of Occam's Razor!"

"Yes, you're right . . . the Stars . . ."

Mallinson cleared his throat. "All they have promised, that we can interpret, is information, acceptance, on a restricted level, of course, to the society — immeasurably great — to which they and other races belong; the decimation, we gather, of some life-forms which detract from our energies and productive power . . . I imagine we will be able to stamp out most of our diseases in the next decades! All this is not to be an outright gift, of course; we can see why. That would remove all incentive, cause us to stagnate intellectually. We must do our own work; they will provide directive hints, aid when such is needed. And eventually . . ."

Sacco, whose vocal inflection was normally his only dramaticism, stood up suddenly, one hand pointing, trembling slightly. "Eventually . . . the Stars!"

There was no more talk until the rush of the engines and of the atmosphere slowly deepened, and the plane slanted downward. Peering out as they strapped themselves into the seats, they could make out blue ragged mountains, and beyond them, a plain.

As they banked sharply, maneuvering to land on the miles-long slab of concrete at the rocketry station, Doiener looked up and asked quietly, "Why?"

The question hung in the cabin.

Notelsky and Bramling looked at each other. Sacco shrugged. Mallinson said slowly, "As I've said, we can't begin to understand how they think. I've tried—and have only the faintest inklings, very probably totally incorrect. Maybe altruism; though what the concept means to them . . ."

Doener was shaking his head. "I mean why is it they have picked us now, come to us? What is it we have done that has brought us up to their level, or at least to the level where they will now associate themselves with us? Are we, after all, now so much better, so much more intelligent, than we were a century before? Have we this much more promise? I wouldn't have thought so."

"Of course," said Mallinson. "We are, for one thing, at least able to live together in peace. To settle our disputes without violence, in large groups, as nations, as well as individuals. We have learned, or are learning to fit our populations to our productive ability . . . and that simple step may yet prove one of the most valuable we have ever taken! We are beginning to grow emotionally and mentally mature as a people, as well as technologically expert."

Sacco nodded. "We've put up our satellite," he said. "Landed on the Moon and Mars. That activity is most probably what has attracted their attention to us . . . and that attention has convinced them that we are now ready for provisional citizenship in their galactic culture."

They touched down roughly, rolling fast, braked with a jerking motion that sent puffs of smoke backward from the tires. They slowed, and approached the hangars. Doener was silent, then; but as they stopped rocking, and the helicopter settled instantly beside them, he whispered gently, "I hope . . ."

He did not finish.

The five of them stood on the side of a slight rise, insensible to the cluster of uniforms and civilian dress on the top of the rise, and stared at the shifting incredibility of the "ship"

Sacco and Mallinson, fully as bemused as the others, led the group slowly down the slope toward the shimmering, fading patterns—or sets of patterns. The eye could not quite grasp the structure, which seemed to alter as they moved slowly closer, to shift through perspectives that would require other senses than sight to follow.

And the Aliens were there.

The five men heard them speaking.

Bramling was white with excitement. Doener, outwardly impassive, stared piercingly into the disorientation. Notelsky shifted from one foot to another, scowling. Sacco and Mallinson stood side by side, slightly ahead of the others, their brows wrinkled in conversation. The cigarette fell unheeded, unlit from Sacco's fingers.

They concentrated on the . . . voice . . . that whispered in their minds, fading in and out of their ability to comprehend, confronting them for the first time in their lives with something truly alien from humanity.

They fought down instinctive terror . . . the thing in their minds cowering in its cave from the dark unknown, its guardian fire gone out.

The voice stopped.

Sacco, by automatic consent the spokesman, stepped forward. He cleared his throat uncertainly, hesitated, and concentrated.

Doener cried suddenly, shrilly, "No!"

"What . . ." They looked. Mallinson, gone gray, pointed with Doener, who stood like a tiny statue, his mouth sagging, pointing.

At the ants.

A tide of ants, flowing restlessly under the hot sun, spilled down the slope some yards from them. Glittering in the sun, red ants and black. Moving slowly, to and fro. Tiny million-strong.

Listening. And answering!

Through their contact with the Aliens, they could hear the voice of the Ants.

Mallinson recognized his own voice and stopped talking. His hand was clamped on Notelsky's shoulder. Somehow they were back on top of the rise. Sacco, his face twisted, stood beside them. Bramling was walking up the slope toward them, walking as if in a dream. Doiener sat below them, his chin on his hands, watching the ants move to the "ship" and disappear.

"Impossible," said Sacco, distantly. Mallinson found sane words "It's real."

"It's wrong! It can't be them! It has to be us!"

"Why?" Notelsky laughed, and had trouble stopping.

"They . . . they aren't . . . We are intelligent life!"

Mallinson had regained some control. "How do we know the Aliens' standards of intelligence? How do we know what, or even how, an ant . . . the ants think? When we don't even know surely what thought itself is? How can we guess what turning point, what ant-philosophy, what determining level reached by them called the Aliens' attention to them?"

Bramling reached them. He paused briefly, and smiled gently at them, his ruddy face a blank. Then he walked on, in a straight line, not toward the helicopter and the huddle of white-faced men. He stumbled occasionally as he walked. Mallinson watched him go.

Sacco made a sound in his throat and began to shake. Notelsky suddenly slapped him hard, twice, across the face. "Frank!" he rumbled. "Get Bramling! Quick, boy, we need him, and he needs help!"

Sacco stood for a second, blinking, as reason returned to his eyes, and then he muttered, "Thanks." He ran loosely after the swaying Bramling, who was vanishing into the woods.

"Should we have known?" asked Notelsky.

Mallinson fumbled without looking at his pipe. "How could we? No more than we know what to do now. Dealing with silence, we couldn't even understand enough to realize that other species might be closer mentally to the Aliens. Maybe it's a mass-brain sort of thing . . . it would almost have to be, with the ants. But who knows? Not I." He raised the empty pipe to his face, looked at it. "I'll get Doiener. We had better leave."

"Do you think . . ."

"Danger? No." Mallinson smiled a smile as empty as the pipe, at the pale arch of the sky, as empty as he felt. "I don't think they know we're here . . . that we exist. And even if they do, why should they—either of them—bother with vermin? Vermin that are, finally, essentially harmless?"

Doiener rose to meet him. The little man's eyes were wet but steady. He even smiled. "So. Now we know how we stand, Scotty." They glanced back briefly, and walked away. Mallinson's head down. "There is one thing that may yet be a consolation," Doiener went on, softly. "Now we will have it all to do ourselves." He gestured up at the sky. "They don't want us. So we're on our own again. And we'll build our own future—up there."

Mallinson stared at him. Then he smiled . . . still emptily, but with something like the beginning of hope. "Thank God for you, Hans," he muttered. "I wonder how many of the rest of us you are worth?"

He put his hand on the little man's stooped shoulder, and they went over the crest of the rise without looking back toward the Aliens, and walked toward the helicopter where the other humans waited.

THE END



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